

African American grocers.<sup>31</sup> This finding supports the theory that neighborhood businesses developed to support localized needs. The mobilization efforts associated with the shipyards and the war effort then began to play a role in African American employment, with sizable numbers working in skilled trades again.

One of the groups that remained in the city was the small number of African Americans homeowners. These black property owners were encouraged to hold their ground. The local newspaper advised: "I counsel not to leave your bought and paid for homes and whatever little is dear and belongs to you .... If you possess any property in Wilmington don't sell just now. Keep it till things tone down and you can get a fairer price if you sell at all."<sup>32</sup> As one researcher found, black property owners were less likely to leave and were most able to adapt to the changed political and economic landscape of white supremacy. Carrie Taylor Wright, daughter of African American deputy collector of customs John E. Taylor, explained that her father remained in the city after the violence because he "had all his earnings here. My grandfather was here. He owned all the property, so there was no reason for him to leave. This was home."<sup>33</sup>

## Property Ownership

The best way to understand the African American community's ability to increase and maintain wealth before the violence of 1898 is through analysis of property ownership. Statewide, about 4,000 African Americans owned real estate in

1870 and the number steadily increased as the years progressed. However, on average, most African Americans did not own the house or property where they lived. That said, urban property ownership among African Americans in North Carolina did increase at a faster rate than rural property ownership between 1875 and 1895.<sup>34</sup> Pushing the increase in urban ownership were the efforts of local groups, within towns like Wilmington, that sponsored their own organizations to assist local workers in acquiring property through mortgages. By 1897, 1,016 African Americans owned real estate in the city.<sup>35</sup> Tracing ownership of and transfer of property by African Americans is extremely problematic since property could be transferred in a number of ways that were not documented in the deed books.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kenzer noted that "every ten years from 1865 to 1915 black landowners as a whole would gain ownership of about 1 percent of the value of real estate in North Carolina, even though the black percentage of the state population would actually decline." He observed, however, that "adverse social, economic, and political circumstances prevented most blacks from becoming landowners by 1915." Another study has shown that in North Carolina the number of blacks owning homes jumped from 15 percent of the population to 26 percent of the population owning homes by 1910. In 1910, Wilmington ranked sixth in the state in black home ownership rates behind leading towns such as Elizabeth City, Fayetteville, Kinston, New Bern, and Washington, and was well ahead of Charlotte and Durham. Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners*, 10, 20, 34; Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 180-181; U. S. Department of Commerce, *Negro Population, 1790-1915*, 473.

<sup>35</sup> Cody, "After the Storm," 124.

<sup>36</sup> As an example, Robert Kenzer noted that of the 293 black men who owned land in Halifax County in 1870, none were mentioned in recorded deeds in the county for the period between emancipation and the census. Other methods for transfer of property could be through gift, court transaction, bequest, and quit claims, among a host of other obscure methods. Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners*, 11.

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<sup>31</sup> Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> *Wilmington Morning Star*, November 15, 1898.

<sup>33</sup> Cody, "After the Storm," 156; Transcript of interview with Carrie Taylor Wright, February 8, 1981, Oral History Files, Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington, N.C.